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Visual silences, nomadic narratives

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Abstract: In this paper I look into letters and paintings of Gwen John's, an expatriate Welsh artist who lived and worked in Paris in the first half of the twentieth century. John's epistolary narratives and paintings are placed within a conceptualization of time as duration, a continuum where past, present and future coexist and wherein linear sequentialities are broken. In this light, untimely events emerge, narrative subjectivities are dispersed and forces of narratability are released. What I argue is that John's letters and paintings create a narrative plane for visual silences and nomadic narratives to be explored as events that force us to think differently about the ethics and aesthetics of what human communication entails.

To me the writing of a letter is a very important event. I try to say what I mean exactly. It is the only chance I have—for in talking, shyness and timidity distort the meaning of my words in people's ears. That I think is one reason I am such a waif. [...] I don't pretend to know anybody well. People are like shadows to me and I am like a shadow. I understand what you say about yourself but it does not change what I said and I feel at ease with you and I should like you to read at will all my thoughts and feelings.

(Lloyd-Morgan, 2004, p.22)

In March 1902, Gwen John, a Welsh artist who studied at the Slade School of Fine Arts in London but mostly lived and worked in Paris, was writing to her friend Michel Salaman a letter expressing her thoughts about happiness, the momentary pleasures of doing art, problems, misunderstandings and gaps in human relations and particularly among friends. In John's perception, the writing of a letter was 'an important event' in that it gave her the opportunity to articulate her thoughts and express herself better than in speaking. Moreover the letter created a block of elongated time for pure communication to emerge: John expected that her addressee would be able to read her 'thoughts and feelings at will' and therefore take time to reflect on meanings that could have been lost in the passing moment of speaking. This is what letters are about after all, a bridge between presence and absence, speech and writing, an act of transgressing space/time boundaries, a discursive technique of safeguarding solitude while sustaining communication, a paradox of the social self.¹

In drawing on the forces and paradoxes of epistolarity, in this paper I make connections between Gwen John's letters and paintings, beautifully brought together in her *Autoportrait a la lettre*. (Langdale, 1987, Frontispiece)

In this self-portrait—the only finished watercolour amongst her work—the artist paints herself vacillating between speaking and letter-writing: she holds a letter in her hand, her mouth is slightly open and her expression shows intense anticipation. This self-portrait was painted at around 1904—during the first years of her life in Paris—and was sent to Augustus Rodin, with whom she had a passionate relationship for over ten years. What I suggest is that both the letter and the self-portrait create a narrative plane, an interface between the textual and the visual wherein John's ambivalence towards speech becomes a sign² of her *will to solitude* and makes forceful connections with an ethico/aesthetic practice of striving for human communication, while critically problematizing it.

Gwen John's auto/biographical archive³ reveals different milieus for her 'will to solitude' to be contextualized. While in the UK, the space/time milieu within which the letter above was written (1899), she had been harshly marginalized in the bohemian circles of London. Indeed her way of life was non-sensical, unintelligible amongst the bohemians. In the four years preceding her move to Paris (1888-1903), she was living in a series of gloomy London flats, one of which was described by her famous brother Augustus John as 'a dungeon ... into which no ray of sunlight could ever penetrate' (cited in Langdale, 1987, p.21). John's obsession with literally living underground in the company of her cat, puzzled and problematised her acquaintances and fellow artists, who labelled her as a recluse. As a young woman trying to pursue her artistic aspirations and live independently, John decided to leave behind the familiar spaces and places of London. As she was writing in her notebook on July 7th, 1923:

You are free only when you have left all.
Leave everybody and let them leave you.
Then only will you be without fear.

(Lloyd-Morgan, 2004, p.130)

Escaping fear, John undertook some wild walking adventures in the French countryside, which ultimately took her to Paris. Her move to Paris however, was not to be an intermission of an artist's life as it was the case with many of her contemporaries.⁴ Paris and later Meudon, a nearby suburb was to become her home for the rest of her life.

John went to Paris deterritorialized by her desire to become an artist, but her lines of flight were soon to be reterritorialized on other regimes of fear, the constrained spaces of heterosexual love.⁵ Her fear of speech becomes a constant theme of her many letters to Rodin, which appear to be filling the gaps of her silence:

If it weren't for my letters I would be a mute girl for you. Wouldn't I? *My letters are my conversations*. When you hold my body in your arms, remember that I also have a spirit, otherwise you will find me very stupid—don't forget that I have my thoughts but I can't talk about them. [my emphasis] (MGJ/B.J5, undated)

John has written repetitively and at length about the importance of letters in her life in general and in her relationship with Rodin, in particular. Letter writing was saturating her daily life, creating multifarious effects on various levels. It was through writing letters

that she could express herself and grapple with existential difficulties, reflect, remember and communicate. As clearly put in the extract above, the writing of a letter was for her ‘a very important event.’

But what is an event? Is it just something that happens? Or is it something that makes new things happen disturbing the order of what we do, the certainty of how we perceive the world and ourselves? Philosophers of the event have seen it as a glimpse into the unreachable, the yet to come (Nietzsche, 1990); a transgression of the limitations of the possible (Foucault, 1963); a flash in the greyness of the virtual worlds that surround us (Deleuze, 2001). In this light, ‘the event is not what occurs (an accident), it is rather inside what occurs, the purely expressed’ (Deleuze, 2001, p.170). Departing from good sense, the event marks historical discontinuities and opens up the future to a series of differentiations.

As an event, the writing of a letter is not simply what occurs, but rather ‘inside what occurs’, John’s desire to reach the other. In writing letters she strives *to become worthy of what happens to her and thereby to be reborn* as a friend, a lover, an artist.⁶ Thus the letter-event transgresses the limitations of the space/time milieu within which it is actualized—John writing in the solitude of her room—and opens up yet unrealized possibilities: communication to come, words to recapture the meaning that speech could have distorted, the power of love to be discursively expressed.

As I will further discuss, love is indeed the red thread going through and sustaining John’s epistolary practices. After all, amorous epistolary discourse saturates the history of letter writing as a literary genre⁷ and as we know from John’s letters, she was particularly immersed in the Richardsonian world of the seductive epistolary novel, *Pamela* and *Clarissa* being her favourite readings and subjects of discussion in her own letters to Rodin. As she was writing on a Wednesday evening: ‘I am going to read Clarissa Harlowe, who I am very interested in’ and in a following letter on Thursday morning: ‘I think of you my Master⁸ on every page I read.’ (MGJ/BJ3 /undated letters without address or name)

Moreover the epistolary event initiates diverse series of events to come: Some letters will be sent, received, read and maybe responded. Some will be cherished, and kept, others will be lost, destroyed or given to archives to be analyzed and rewritten by researchers like me. Or maybe the letter is ‘dead’ at the very moment of its writing—it never arrives anyway in Derrida’s thought.⁹

Deleuze has argued however, that the event cannot be reached, ‘has no present’ (2001, p. 73). The event is always elusive, while allusive, being the perpetual object of a double question: ‘What is going to happen? What has just happened?’ (p.73) In this sense, narrative becomes a medium for the event to be expressed or rather leave its signs¹⁰ and as it has been pointed out, epistolary narratives in particular revolve around the problem of the impossible present, ‘its unseizability haunts epistolary language.’ (Altman, 1982, p.128) In this light, I have worked with John’s letters and paintings raising a two-fold

question: can letters and paintings function both as events and as milieus within which events can be traced? It is exploring this question that I now turn.

Letters and paintings as events in time reconsidered

In his philosophical discussion of the concept of the event, Deleuze has drawn on the Stoics' two-fold conceptualization of time: a) as *Chronos* and as b) *Aion*. *Chronos* is a measurable and divisible conception of time, it delineates a cyclical succession of movements, marking occurrences and their causal links: John is desperate or lonely, then she writes letters. However the event can only be conceptualized within an image of time as *Aion*, time as duration in Bergson's philosophy, a continuum wherein past, present and future co-exist, an unfolding time, wherein events emerge. (Bergson, 2002)

The writing of a letter is in this sense conceptualised as an *event*: it releases forces of narratability and expresses John's desire to relate to others through exposing her vulnerability and dependence.¹¹ As put in one of her letters to Rodin: 'I have a great fear of despair [...] but I got out [...] once I was able to write these letters, I gathered hope in writing them' (MGJ, B.J3, undated). The whole letter is a reflection on how difficult it is to identify the 'reasons' for writing letters, trace the causality underpinning them: 'This was not the reason that I wrote these letters [...] I don't know all the reasons. Fear was one. I have a great fear of despair [...] but I got out [...] once I was able to write these letters, I gathered hope in writing them' (MGJ, B.J3, undated). In this light, writing letters is an event opening up regimes of fear, creating possibilities for hope—life can be different when John writes a letter about her fears, acts upon them, faces her ghosts, exposes her weaknesses. This is very different from placing the letter within the closed causality of the occurrence: John was afraid; this is why she wrote those letters.

What I further suggest is that John's narratability, her desire for her story to be expressed springs forcefully from her 'Self-portrait with a letter'. In creating an artistic image of her ambivalence between speaking and writing, John releases visual forces of her anxiety and invites her viewers to make connections with the ethical problem of what human communication entails. The figure holding a letter in her hand forces the viewer to feel the breathlessness of the moment of receiving a letter from the beloved, or perhaps the anxiety of the moment when a message to the beloved is about to be dispatched. John's self-portrait thus, freezes time in duration: the unrepeatable moment of a concealed message just about to be released and/or revealed. In this context, the painting raises a series of questions: Has she just received this letter or is she about to send it? Why is her mouth open? Is she saying something about the letter she is holding? Who is she talking/writing to? What is the connection between speaking and letter-writing? Is the self-portrait itself a visualization of a cry for help, as love letters often are? As shown above, John had explicitly written that 'my letters are my conversations', but then again, is it possible that fragmented sentences or phrases from her letters can fix anything about the meaning of her paintings? Can we assign any meaning at all to a work of art?

Keeping my analysis within the anti-representational image of thought of Deleuze's philosophy I have made connections with his suggestion of seeing paintings as fields of forces rather than semiotic registers. The very task of painting according to Deleuze is 'the attempt to render visible forces that are not themselves visible' (2003, p.56). What I therefore propose is that the *Self-Portrait with a letter* creates a field where forces of narratability are rendered visible. Taken as a field of forces, John's self-portrait intensifies our ambivalence about what has remained unsaid, visualizes silences, blends the boundaries between oral and written communication. What springs from the canvas is the force of the desire of the narratable subject for her story to be told. The sitter of the self-portrait however, can never be reducible to the content of her story or the figural image of the painting. Self-portraiture is an autographic practice rather than an autobiographical one: an artistic intervention on the experience of the self, a response to the self, not a representation of it. What is further strikingly interesting about this self-portrait is that it was sent to Rodin as a message, a sign of love transformed into a sign of art. Being invested with strong epistolary elements—it was painted to be sent—the portrait becomes a kind of a postcard, a Derridean envoy (1987, p.22):

I have so much to tell you and it all will have to hold on snapshot postcards—and immediately be divided among them. Letters in small pieces, torn in advance, cut out, recut. So much to tell you but all and nothing, more than all, less than nothing—to tell you is all and a postcard supports it well [...]

To tell the other is all, but so much for John to say, and her letters and portrait/postcard seem to support it well; they become events rendering silences visible and thus releasing virtual forces of narratability and opening up her time to limitless future possibilities: friendship to come, love to be expressed, the artist to emerge:

I received your card my Master this evening on returning from my session. It gave me a great joy. My room is calm. I thought for a long time of the letter that I am going to write to you. I thought that in this calmness I can easily talk to you about my passion and of all the little things that are born from this and of the dreams that I had these last nights [...] you can judge from the insufficiency of this letter that it is very difficult to write about a great love. (MGJ/BJ3, undated letters without address or name)

Although the letter form has been discussed as 'tailored for the love plot' (Altman, 1982, p.14), what is passionately conveyed in John's amorous epistolary discourse is that letters cannot really express the immensity of love—they can only carry or emit signs of it. What letters can do however is to contract the experience of the present moment, disrupt the ceaseless linear continuity of time, become an event in the experience of duration, allow time to be sensed as *Aion*. The following letter is a contemplation of the moment of writing as an experience of the pure present:

I think of tomorrow when I will see him and I forget sometimes the infinite present. This is neither intelligent, nor sage! No, but I live in the present when I write to him and when I prepare to recite my poetry to him and when I look after my health! And

I am going to gradually learn not to forget the infinite present! (MGJ/BJ4/Letters to Julie 1906-7)

Although letters cannot replace the physical absence of the beloved, they are interwoven in a narrative fabric wherein presence and absence trigger strong emotions and affects, they ‘permit an intimate, interiorized communion’. (Altman, 1982, p.15) Moreover, John’s letters carry traces of how she experiments with love as force, disrupting the order of the present, a process of living through what can only be experienced in fractured moments of being—the moment of writing, as in the letter above.

John’s *postcard-portrait* and *event-letters* emit signs of visual silences and carry traces of virtual forces, narratives of intensities and passions, messages for the yet to come. In writing letters John follows nomadic passages through different subject positions and yet she cannot be pinned down to any of them. John is not reducible to the content of her letters and they cannot establish any causal relationship between what she does, why she does what she does and who she is. Being conceived beyond the boundaries of sequentially structured narratives, psychosocial states of mind and semiotic registers, John’s letters carry traces of lines of flight and eruptions; they compose a world of nomadic subjects, they ultimately become nomadic narratives, a suggestion that I further discuss in the following section.

Who writes or paints?

In classical narratology, events are always conceptualised in relation to actors by whom ‘they are caused or experienced’ (Bal, 1985, cited in Gibson, 1996, p.181) and who can further be detached from the event and become consistent characters, carrying the sequential order of the narrative.

Troubling the universality of a chronological conception of time, what I have suggested is that instead of being sequentially ordered, John’s letters and paintings—conceived as events—become assemblages of forces and affects within an image of time as duration, wherein past, present and future co-exist.

Through her letters and paintings—and mostly her portraits and self-portraits—John emerges as a fascinating figure. She becomes able to depart from good sense, the image of the artist constructed in the process of measuring time against unusual but still regular events: girl goes to the Slade, trains as an artist, starts exhibiting, lives in the bohemian circles of London, gets married or not, goes on working or gives it up to support her artist partner.¹² John’s chronotopes are disrupted: she does not survive the freedom of the bohemian circles in London and becomes a minoritarian subject even amongst the margins, goes off travelling, ends up in Paris, has to work as a model to support herself and her art, meets Rodin, falls in love, her lines of flight become reterritorialized within Rodin’s circle, but once again she becomes a minoritarian figure within the Parisian artists’ colony. John abandons common sense for visceral experiences of unlimited passion and uncompromised solitude: she works as a model, she paints, writes letters to

her lover and friends and looks after her cat. In this light her life unfolds against the rhythm of a specific set of occurrences structuring Woman's time or even the bohemian/artist's time: she lives out of order and her letters and paintings carry traces of solitude within disjointed space/time milieus.

Having displaced herself in space and time John paints portraits of women who appear to do nothing more than reading a book or a letter, holding their cat in their lap or just looking.¹³ These women seem to have abandoned conventional tasks of their femininity: being busy within the world of domesticity, holding babies, being beautiful, offering themselves to the gaze of the other. What John paints is the force of women's space/time as momentarily undisturbed by the anxieties of the earthy care for others; put simply, women who think. The almost monochromatic planes that John adopts in most of her later paintings¹⁴ seem to absorb the figure, making visible the forces of her 'becoming imperceptible' as the coded Woman of patriarchal semiotic registers, while shedding light on the invisibility of the Deleuzian moment of contemplation. John's figures are like Virginia Woolf's characters: 'Thus if you talk of a beautiful woman you mean only something flying fast which for a second uses the eyes, lips or cheeks of Fanny Elmer, for example, to glow through' (Woolf, 1976, cited in Gibson, 1996, p.204). In a parallel way, if you talk of a thinking woman in John's portraits, you mean only a gesture, a direction of the gaze, a body posture, a turning of the head, or just a colour that enwraps the viewer in the milieu of silence.

In the same way that the novel becomes for Kundera, 'the imaginary paradise of the individual' (Kundera, 1988, cited in Gibson, 1996, p.192), letters and paintings create an imaginary world for John wherein she makes connections with the virtual forces that surround her lived experiences. There are many and different Johns and her character has both an actual and a virtual dimension. John becomes an event in the sense that she is complicated, keeping all the selves that compose her in a continuous state of intensity. Her letters hold differences together, not as oppositions but as multiplicities: despair—and—hope, woman—and—artist, inside—and—outside, solitude—and—communication. As Deleuze has noted, 'even if there are only two terms [woman and artist], there is an AND between the two, which is neither the one nor the other, nor the one which becomes the other, but which constitutes the multiplicity' (Deleuze and Parnet, 2002, pp.34-35). In this sense, dualisms can be dispersed working in the intermezzo between the two terms: what is happening in the middle, becomings between being a woman and an artist, lines of flight between despair and hope, deterritorializations between inside and outside, connections between silence and communication. This is where I have worked with John's letters and paintings: in the intermezzo of narrative sequences, in the gaps and interstices of the always-inconclusive epistolary narratives, in milieus of silences where the event emerges. It is thus tracing signs of these events in what I have charted as nomadic narratives that I now turn.

Tracing events in letters and paintings

In tracing events in John's letters I will take up the question of 'what modes of narrative simulation of the event are possible' (Gibson, 1996, p.199). As already discussed, the event is always elusive and narratives can only carry traces of its emergence or passage. Clearly, narratives can take many forms, but not all of them can create conditions of possibility for the event to emerge. John was writing letters, regularly narrating her experiences of living and working in and around Paris. She would further write letters about her paintings—the ways she worked, the difficulties she had, the pleasures she took, her aspirations and plans. Her letters open up trails for nomadic becomings, the ways she keeps constituting and reconstituting herself as an artist, a woman inhabiting public spaces, a woman in love, a woman-who-loves-her-cat. In this sense John's letters can be read in terms of how they narrate events, albeit not wholly marked by them. What I suggest is that her letters constitute a matrix, an assemblage of narratives of events and other narratives, and it is on discursive modalities of the event in her letters that I will now focus.

Drafting the self

My dear Master, I am sad that I cannot write to you in a beautiful language. Sometimes I am like a poor spirit always being around and trying to be loved without being able to speak—mute like the birds. I hope that one day I will find beautiful and eloquent words that will attract your attention and then I will be able to stay with you more often. But maybe I will never find them [...]

(MR,MGJ,B.J3, undated)

As already discussed John's letters and paintings create a plane of consistency for human communication to be problematized. In the letter above, John cannot find eloquent words to express her love. However it was not only the poetics of love that she was worried about. There were basic grammar and syntax problems that were preoccupying her. John never felt comfortable writing in French; copying her letters and proof reading them would become part of her daily epistolary practices: 'I have copied a letter that I wrote yesterday but I didn't give it to you, since I saw that there were spelling mistakes and a fever came down to me which prevented me from copying it yesterday' (MR,MGJ,B.J3, undated). As a matter of fact, she would often copy her letters 'several times' before sending them as revealed in a postscript to an undated letter: 'Sometimes I copy my letters several times because of my bad writing.' (MR,MGJ,B.J3)

If oral and written communication is boldly articulated as an issue in John's letters to Rodin in terms of her difficulties with the French language, her letters to her friends in the UK and particularly her life-long correspondence to Tyrwhitt equally express difficulties with choosing words in English: 'No doubt all these words are not chosen well. It is difficult to express oneself in words for painters, isn't it?' (NLW MS 21468D, ff.31-3, 15/7/1927) Painters do not express themselves well in words, is the idea here, a statement that it was impossible to be raised with Rodin, since the subject position she was writing from, was that of the model/lover/protégée, not that of the artist.

John's letters were therefore always in a draft form. She was continuously drafting them and even when they were sent there were always oscillations, ambivalences and regrets: 'I have just read the letter that I wrote on Thursday morning [...] and after reading it I realized that this letter has not said anything that I have tried to make it say. It says almost nothing.' (MR,MGJ,B.J3). John considered her letters to be irresolute and incomplete—there is no closure in them. Openness is of course a mark of the epistolary discourse and a theme much discussed in the theorization of epistolary narratives.¹⁵ John's draft and inconclusive letters however, are a constant reminder of things that are continuously excised from our communication with others, things that are left unsaid or incomplete, narratives that have broken but whose fragments remain hanging in the virtualities that surround the actual moments of our communication.

Gaps, silences and broken narratives

My dear Master,

I have returned from a walk in the Boulogne Forest, the weather is so nice there [...] I have a big desire to see the sea and the country, but I could only go there with you, even if this perhaps will never happen. I see the sky and the stars from my window, I know that we are on an island and that the sky is like the sea, all around—I wonder why I am here, what to do and what is this world and where we go after we die [...] It is very strange that you know the answer no more than I do. All the people I see in the street seem so preoccupied with themselves and in their own world my Master. Myself, I am a stranger not only in this country but in the world; I don't feel at home and I am always wondering why I am here [...] when I am not with you, or writing to you or drawing my cat to show it to you, always the same questions come to trouble me. Now I am going to lie in and read in bed.

(MGJ/BJ5/undated letters with a name of place)

Written on a Sunday night between 1906 and 1907, the letter above recounts a day out in the countryside, raises metaphysical questions, exposes John's existential fears and expresses her love for Rodin. These themes recur in the many love letters she wrote to him for over ten years and create an epistolary rhythm of seemingly unmatched associations: a landscape and the beloved; unanswered questions; gaps and silences in communication. John was a painter, not a writer, but the poetics of her letters contain the complication of multiplicities that Deleuze has identified in Proust's narrative art: a rhythm of interruptions and broken narratives, creating a plane of consistency without forming a homogeneous unity: John's letters narrate unmatched events, 'crammed together to the point of bursting' (2001, p.122); they constantly evoke the gaps, silences, misunderstanding and ruptures in the way we communicate, the impaired ways we love, our ultimate failure to reach the other.¹⁶ But the force with which events are narrated in her letters disrupt the certainty of our perceptions about who she is and how she relates to the structures and axes along which her world has been analysed: a patriarchal regime of the private/public dichotomies of modernity. John's letters create an assemblage, a matrix of silences, gaps and lacunae wherein the meshwork of her/our social world can be unveiled; they project a vision of life which is not attached to fixed subjects or segmented

structures. The blurring of pronouns, figures and subjects in her letters is a forceful sign of this complexity, as I will further discuss.

Pronoun ambiguity, names and signatures in the epistolary discourse

My dear sister,

When I think that it is to you that I write Julie, I am more daring than if I was told that it is my Master who will see my letter. So, I will always imagine your little eyes when I write my letter [...] I fear that my Master will grow weary of my uniformity [...] However, I tell myself that perhaps in the garden a small tree straight and strong has as much value as the bright flowers [...] in my heart, not just in my mind I find a force (and if I didn't have anything that I would ever dare talk or write to my Master, I sense in myself a force that I can talk about without vanity)
(MGJ/BJ4/Letters to Julie)

On a Monday night between October and November 1909, John was writing to Julie, articulating her need and desire to create her as an imaginary addressee of things that were hidden deep down in her heart and had to be expressed in the narrative form of the epistolary novel. In the absence of a real friend/confidante, John would create an image of a present addressee to whom she could open her heart. As Altman has noted, the imaginary addressee is a constant theme of the epistolary literature:

Imagination substitutes what reality cannot supply. The world of the lonely person, or of the person separated from lover or friend, becomes so peopled with images that when [he] picks up the pen, it is natural that [he] should engage in an immediate conversation with the image conjured up by the act of writing. (Altman, 1982, p.139)

As revealed in one of her letters to Rodin, the idea to create Julie as her imaginary confidante occurred to John after reading Richardson's *Clarissa*, a novel that as already discussed, had made a great impression on her. Indeed, the epistolary figure of the confidante is essential in the epistolary novel, 'called into existence' as Altman succinctly notes, 'by the need of every letter writer to have "a friendly bosom" into which [he] can "disbuthen" his cares.' (p.50) Julie is thus 'called into existence' as an epistolary figure, but what is extremely interesting and unique is that she is not deployed as a narrative technique in a novel, she is an imaginary figure structuring 'real life' letters. Emerging from the real and imaginary world of John's letters, Julie personifies the interface between fiction and reality; she is a figure constantly leaping into the virtual worlds surrounding John's actuality.

As 'an essential figure in epistolary literature' (Altman, 1982, p.50), the confidante can feature as either passive or active. Julie apparently assumes the role of the passive confidante: she is there 'to listen to confessions, listen to stories' (p.50). Her presence in the correspondence however, triggers the very stories she listens to, incites confessions,

but also becomes the ‘sounding board to the [hero’s] sentiments’ (p.50) and of course a repository of repressed desires, an archivist of risky events, impossible thoughts and ineffable feelings.¹⁷ What is finally both puzzling and paradoxical is that the letters to Julie are ultimately sent to Rodin. What is going on then in this plane of real and imaginary addressees?

Altman makes the distinction between ‘the language of friendship’ and ‘the language of love’ in the epistolary discourse. As he notes, they are two ‘separate, although related aspects of epistolary *confiance*’ (p.69). Julie obviously assumes the role of the friend-confidante and Rodin is of course the lover, both principal characters in the epistolary narrative. However as the ultimate recipient of Julie’s letters, Rodin is inevitably transformed into a character who is a fusion of both; whether he wants it or not, he becomes a lover, friend and confidant in John’s epistolary world and the gender line in the confidante-lover relationship is broken.

In this context, John’s letters—addressed to Julie, but written for Rodin—create a maze of pronoun ambiguity, wherein the distinctions of first, second and third persons are blurred. In writing to Julie about her ‘master’ John simultaneously uses both the second person and the third-person pronoun for the very person to whom she is writing. And this maze becomes even more chaotic by the fact that Gwen John signed her letters to Rodin and Julie as Marie, the middle name of Gwendolyn Mary John, while she would keep signing all her letters to friends and family in the UK as Gwen. There is indeed a playful relation between nomination and narration in John’s letters creating a field of narrative forces, ‘I sense in myself a force that I can talk about’, wherein many epistolary figures emerge and move along different subject positions of the correspondence: Gwen the artist, Marie as Rodin’s model and lover, and Marie as Julie’s sister, Rodin as her lover and mentor and Rodin as the recipient of Julie’s letters.

The order in the logic of sense of John’s letters has been irrevocably shattered but it is losing or rather dispersing the self in this maze of addressers and addressees that John comes closer to pure communication. As put in the letter above: ‘When I think that it is to you that I write Julie, I am more daring than if I was told that it is my Master who will see my letter.’ Altman has noted that epistolary narratives ‘depend on moments of mystification [...] and moments of candour (1982, p.82) and it seems that Julie’s presence pushes the balance of John’s letters towards candour, albeit under the false pretension that ‘the master’ will not see them. In this light both the form and the content of John’s letters are shaped by her imaginary addressee.

Moving between secrets, truths and lies, mystification and candour, Julie as an epistolary figure, opens up the circle of internal readers in John’s correspondence.¹⁸ Readers are clearly terribly important in the epistolary narrative, which is totally revolving around the I/you relationship. ‘The letter writer simultaneously seeks to affect [his] reader and is affected by [him]’, notes Altman (1982, p.88), stressing the importance of the *epistolary pact*: ‘To a great extent, this is the epistolary pact—the call for response from a specific reader within the correspondent’s world.’ As the *friend/confidante you*, of John’s amorous discourse Julie evokes narratives that Rodin—as a *lover you*—would have blocked,

notwithstanding the fact that he will read these letters after all in the end and he will be invited to respond. We know of course that Rodin wrote very few and very short letters to John—there were only sixty of his letters in the archives of the Rodin museum. However, Rodin did respond to John's letters by resuming his visits to her room. As John's biographer has noted, it was actually the fact that he would constantly reappear after long absences that kept John both excited and upset, particularly when she happened not to be in her room. (Roe, 2002, p.99) As John was writing to Rodin on a Saturday evening: 'The concierge has just told me that you have come here this morning my Master. It's such a great pain to have missed you.' (MGJ, BJ3, undated letters without place or name) John's letters were thus successful in effectuating responses from her reader, albeit not epistolary ones.

Dreaming and painting

The assemblage of the letters and paintings out of which John constantly emerges can take different forms analogous to certain states that Deleuze and Proustian criticism in general have identified in the *Search of Lost Time*, most notably, sleeping, dreaming and the moment of waking, where Proust is commented to preserve 'the purity of the encounter or of chance' (Gibson, 1996, p.203). It is this Proustian moment of waking that leaves its traces in the letters John was writing about her dreams and it is in these letters that forceful connections with the virtual and transgressive moments of the actual can be mostly traced:

[...] One dream was strange. I dreamt that we had gone up the Eiffel tower and high up we had found the sea and we got undressed and were swimming, oh we were so happy! But after some time a man cried that the machine was about to go down and we were forced to get dressed.

(MGJ/BJ5/undated letters, citing persons)

A dream about ascending the Eiffel tower to find the sea at the top, brings together a cluster of *heterotopias* in John's life: real-and-imaginary emplacements within the hegemonic spaces that were surrounding her—the sea she loved so much, becoming part of the Parisian urban landscape, a corner in the world to shelter her love.¹⁹

Writing letters about her dreams became for John a practice through which she was able to recognize and indeed constitute herself, a Foucauldian *technology of the self*. As she had clearly put it in one of her letters to Rodin: 'My dreams are always a reflection of the state of my mind. And it is easier to recount a dream than to describe my feelings or my mind.' (MGJ/BJ5/undated letters, citing persons)

John has written extensively about her dreams in her letters, but she has never actually drawn on them as themes for her paintings. The sitters of her many portraits however, are often presented as dream-like figures oscillating between real and virtual worlds, a fusion between herself and others.

In two paintings, *A Lady reading* (c.1910-1911) and *Girl reading at the window* (1911) she presents herself as a spiritual figure, the image of the intellectual woman reading her book by the open window (Langdale, 1987, p.38, cat. n. 24, 25). Yet, the posture and the cloths of the female figures in both paintings make them appear as anachronistically relating to their surroundings: they disturb the linearity and order of their era and their place. Why are these young women dressed in black? Is wearing black becoming 'a bodily practice marked by colour?' (Dinshaw, 2007, p.114), a textile/colour based *technology of the self* in the process of becoming-intellectual or becoming-artist?

In discussing these two particular paintings, art critic Alicia Foster has considered John's interest in religion and her spiritual involvement in Catholicism and has further contextualised them in the influential trend of the revival of religious art in France (1999, pp.52, 53). Here again however, Foster's analysis although offering interesting insights is still deployed within the constraints of a phenomenological approach to the work of art. What I suggest however is that John's portraits express more than what can be seen in the canvas or what can be interpreted as a sign. Lisa Tickner has commented that John's paintings are 'stubbornly resistant to language' (2004, p.29) and I would add systems of representation.

What I therefore suggest that the figures of these two paintings seem to inhabit multiple temporalities and to experience temporal and spatial heterogeneities; they emerge as ambivalent figures in John's and indeed our perception of the times of modernity, they disturb their own contemporaneity, but they also reveal the heterogeneity of our times. Young women dressed in dark plain clothes, standing in their rooms and reading their books disrupt past and present perceptions of women's places and women's times.

Indeed, John's paintings create planes of intensities for singularities to emerge and forces to be released since for Deleuze and Guattari, 'whereas philosophers create concepts that lead thought to the plane of pure difference from which intensities emerge, artists present us with those intensities' (Colebrook, 2002, p.176). It is therefore intensive moments of pure thinking that John's paintings capture: 'What is going on? What is this world about? Am I that woman? Am I that name? Who am I?' are some of the questions that the becoming-imperceptible narratable self seems to be raising to herself as well as to her viewers and to myself as a researcher.

Visual silences, nomadic narratives

John lived in a world of fragmented debris: the unbearable exuberance of the bohemian circles in London, the Slade influence and the imperative of becoming a professional artist, the imaginary of the Parisian escape, the harsh reality of working as a model, the force and passion of unconditional love, the difficulties of being an alien in language within a terra incognita. Her letters and paintings respond to rather than represent these conditions; they refer to a life that passes through her rather than a life that leaves a mark on her as a subject that she should be. It is for this reason that John is not reducible to the contents of her letters and any biography based on them is inherently fraught with difficulties. Her letters however can be the expression of a life as an experiment, a

becoming other. Their overall effect is usually inconsistent, non-sequential, and irresolute. John's letters and paintings create an assemblage, a machine of nomadic narratives, silences and visual forces, a plane for the emission of signs and for encounters between words and images.

In this light, John's archive becomes an event acting on several important themes: nomadic existence as a challenge to identity, epistolary narratability as a mode of expression of the will to solitude, art as a way of life, virtual forces inhering in actual encounters, disruptions in the flow of linear time. Conceived as events, John's letters and paintings respond to the Leibnizian problem of how the sealed *monads* that have neither door nor window' can possibly communicate. (Deleuze, 2000, p.163) It is—in Deleuze's commentary—by enveloping the whole world and unfolding their own viewpoints that monads 'set up among their solitudes a spontaneous *correspondence*.' (p.164) John's letters and paintings express her world and it is through the unfolding of silences, nomadic narratives and visual forces that lines of communication among solitudes are being created. What is interesting in tracing these lines is not accessing any kind of ultimate truth around the subject but rather the possibility of working within their narrative matrix, exploring its modes of operation, tracing signs of events, contextualizing silences in a new image of thought about reaching the other, doing art, becoming a woman.

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National Library of Wales, Archives, Gwen John's papers (NLW MS)
Rodin Museum, Marie Gwendolen John's boxes (MR\MGJ)

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Appendix:

Figure 1: Gwen John: self-portrait with a letter c.1904, watercolour (22x16), Rodin Museum, Paris

Biographical note

Dr Maria Tamboukou is Reader in Sociology and Co-director of the Centre of Narrative Research, at the University of East London. Her research interests and publications are in auto/biographical narratives, feminist theories, foucauldian and deleuzian analytics, the sociology of gender and education, gender and space and the sociology of art. She is the author of *Women, Education, the Self: a Foucauldian Perspective* (Palgrave, 2003) and co-editor with Stephen J. Ball of *Dangerous encounters: genealogy and ethnography* (Peter Lang, 2003) and with Molly Andrews and Corinne Squire of *Doing Narrative Research* (London, Sage, 2008). Her current research focuses on fin-de-siècle women artists' letters and paintings, exploring power/desire connections in the interface of visual and textual narratives.

¹ For an excellent discussion of the paradoxes and contradictions of epistolarity, see Altman, 1982.

²The concept of the sign is taken here from Deleuze's analysis of Proust's work (2000). As Marks comments, signs for Deleuze are not objects or acts of recognition, but rather encounters that can only be sensed or felt (1998, pp. 38, 83).

³ The archive my research includes two extended bodies of correspondence—her letters to her life-long friend and fellow student at the Slade, Ursula Tyrwhitt (National Library of Wales) and Augustus Rodin, (Rodin Museum Archives), a publication of selected letters and notebooks (Lloyd-Morgan, 2004), two biographies, (Chitty, 1987, Roe, 2002), exhibition catalogues (Langdale and Jenkins, 1982; Jenkins and Stephens, 2004) and other art publications on her work (Taubman, 1982; Langdale, 1987; Foster 1999).

⁴ As pointed out in Gill Perry's study of women artists in Paris in the early twentieth century, 'there were [...] many women artists from Europe and America who were coming to Paris for shorter periods to work and/or study and exhibit [since] Paris had become an undisputed international centre with a seemingly magnetic appeal' (1995, p.16).

⁵ *Deterritorialization, reterritorialization, lines of flight, striated spaces and smooth spaces* are central notions in Deleuze and Guattari's philosophical writings, particularly elaborated in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1988). A common aspect in all these notions is the importance of the relations we have with space in general and the earth in particular. We experience the world as a continuum of *striated* and *smooth* spaces: 'smooth space is constantly being translated, transversed into a striated space; striated space is constantly being reversed, returned to a smooth space. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, p.474) *Striated spaces* are hierarchical, rule-intensive, strictly bounded and confining, whereas *smooth spaces* are open, dynamic and allow for transformations to occur. In this light, 'all becoming occurs in smooth space' (p. 486). As a matter of fact we constantly move between *deterritorialization*—freeing ourselves from the restrictions and boundaries of controlled, *striated* spaces—and *reterritorialization*—repositioning ourselves within new regimes of *striated spaces*. As Deleuze and Guattari warn us: 'You may make a rupture, draw a line of flight, yet there is still a danger that you will reencounter organizations that restratify everything, formations that restore power to a signifier, attributions that reconstitute a subject.' (p.9) However in the context of Deleuze and Guattari's geophilosophy, where we start from or where we end up—beginnings and endings—are not so important. In their writings, they have actually put forward: 'other ways of moving and traveling: proceeding from the middle, through the middle, coming and going, rather than starting and finishing' (p. 25). What is critical in the experience of freedom is our movement in between, when we follow *lines of flight* or escape, the intermezzo, the process of *becoming other*. In this light, Deleuze and Guattari prioritize *lines of flight* to conflicts and battles which are so central in the Foucauldian conceptualization of power: 'a social field' they write, 'is defined less by its conflicts and contradictions than by the lines of flight running through it.' (p.90)

⁶ Paraphrasing Deleuze who actually writes: 'to become worthy of what happens to us [...] and thereby to be reborn' (2001, p.170)

⁷ See Altman, 1982 and Kauffman, 1986.

⁸ Rodin was often addressed as 'the master' by his circle. Rilke for example who worked with Rodin as his secretary would always address him as 'My dear Master', a salutation that John would also use to open her letters to Rodin.

⁹ Drawing on Derrida, Stanley has eloquently commented how all letters are ‘dead’ in the sense that ‘the letter that was written and sent is rather different from the one that arrives and is read because it has changed by its travels in time and space from the there and then of writing to the here and now of reading’ (2004, p.208)

¹⁰ Deleuze’s take on narratives as a medium for the event to be expressed, moves the analysis beyond the circle of Schleiermacher’s narrative hermeneutics and Dilthey’s biographical hermeneutics, but it still addresses the issue of the balance between diachronic and synchronic analyses, showing that the very distinction between the synchronic and the diachronic is rendered obsolete when time is conceived as duration. I am indebted to the anonymous reviewer’s comment that has pointed this departure from the hermeneutics tradition in my analysis.

¹¹ The very act of narration is immanently political, relational and embodied, as Cavarero following Arendt has forcefully shown. To the Arendtian view that human beings as unique existents live together and are constitutively exposed to each other through the bodily senses, Cavarero adds the narratability of the self. The self emerges as narratable in that it is constitutive of the very desire of listening to her story being narrated. This desire is interwoven with what Cavarero (2000, p.35) conceives as ‘the unreflective knowledge of my sense-of-self through [which] I know that I have a story and that I consist in this story’. Moreover, the narratable self is not reducible to the contents of the story either as ‘a construction of the text or the effect of the performative power of narration’; in this light, narratability is not about intelligibility, but about familiarity with the ‘spontaneous narrating structure of memory’ (Cavarero 2000, pp. 35, 34). For a discussion of how John is constituted as a narratable subject, see Tamboukou, 2008.

¹² Indeed, these were more or less the regular events structuring the life of many of her contemporaries as a series of studies on fin-de-siècle women artists has shown. See amongst others, Chadwick, 1990; Perry 1995, Thomas, 1994.

¹³ Gwen John’s paintings can be viewed on different websites, see the Bridgeman Art Library for a comprehensive collection <http://www.bridgeman.co.uk>. The references to paintings are followed by catalogue numbers from Cecily Langdale, *Gwen John: With a Catalogue Raisonné of the Paintings and a Selection of the Drawings*.

¹⁴ As an indicative list of John’s monochromatic paintings, see, Langdale, 1987, Young Woman in a red Shawl (cat. no. 103, p.99), Girl in a green dress, (cat. no. 99, p.96), Girl holding a rose, (cat. no.83, p.94) Young woman holding a piece of sewing, (cat. no. 79, p.94), Young Woman holding a Black cat (cat. no. 73, p.92), Young woman in a Mulberry dress, (cat. no. 134, p.90), The Pilgrim, (cat. no. 107, p.87), Girl in blue, (cat. no. 82, p.78), Girl in rose (cat. no. 65, p.74)

¹⁵ See Altman 1982, particularly chapter five, ‘The Dynamics of Epistolary closure’ and McArthur, 1990.

¹⁶ There are links here of course between my reading of John’s letters and Pierre Macherey’s *Theory of Literary Production*, particularly in the way he posits reading as a process that produces meaning. Here again, I am indebted to the anonymous reviewer who alerted me to it.

¹⁷ As I have written elsewhere, in her letters to Julie, John would always write about her adventures of moving around in the urban and rural spaces of modernity. (See, Tamboukou, 2007)

¹⁸ Altman (1982) makes the distinction between the internal and the external reader of the epistolary narrative and stresses the importance of the internal reader as ‘a determinant of the letter’s message’ (p.88). See in particular, chapter 3, ‘The Weight of the reader’.

¹⁹ For a discussion of heterotopias in John’s letters, see Tamboukou, 2007.